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ABSTRACT

Community colleges are beginning to recognize that honors programs have a place in a comprehensive curriculum. Community colleges often experience problems attracting status-conscious, middle-class students, unless the institutions can convince the students and their parents that community colleges offer first-rate and academically challenging curricula. Honors programs can help improve the image and recognition of the schools, while providing a challenge to talented and motivated students. Honors programs vary among community colleges in terms of format, eligibility requirements, and academic standards. Typical formats include the following: (1) special honors sections of introductory or general education courses, most often in the liberal arts; (2) prescribed and structured honors curricula including several honors courses that all students must take; (3) core-oriented programs developed around a common theme and an interdisciplinary approach; (4) independent study; (5) regular courses in which enrolled honors students receive more challenging assignments, labs, and tests; and (6) comprehensive honors programs that encompass several of these approaches. Successful honors programs are generally characterized by mechanisms for recognizing the accomplishments of honors students; an enthusiastic, intellectually aware, and dedicated faculty; a program director committed to the program who has time for the administrative responsibilities that the position entails; and an advisory committee. Critics have argued that honors programs are inherently elitist, that they divert funds from the financially needy remedial students to middle-class gifted students. They warn that honors courses will isolate most of the brighter students, and they raise questions of faculty selection. If a college does decide to offer an honors curriculum, it should not be with the primary purpose of increasing enrollment or changing the institutional image, but rather in order to strengthen the college's educational mission and enhance its quest for excellence. (ALB)

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HONORS PROGRAMS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

May 1989

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This paper will examine and evaluate the rationale, goals, characteristics, models, various components and problems of honors programs at community colleges. The paper will reflect the experiences and views of a faculty member's participation in an evolving honors program at a suburban New Jersey Community College.

Honors programs have become an integral part of higher education and their academic benefits have been widely acclaimed. Community colleges, a relatively new sector of higher education, have recognized that honors programs have a place in their curricula. Most community colleges in their mission statements have emphasized their comprehensiveness and diversity. They have established special programs for developmental students, international students, mature or returning students and the handicapped. Within the past decade, more attention has been focused on the needs of motivated high ability students and this has lead to a greater interest in honors programs. No doubt, contributing factors include an increased number of mature and motivated students at community colleges as well as the rapidly rising cost of the tuition, room and board, especially independent colleges/universities. Potentially this could be a boom to the relatively low cost community colleges. However, in an image conscious society, community colleges with largely open door admissions have a problem attracting status conscious middle class students unless the colleges can convince the students and their parents that community colleges offer first rate and academically challenging curricula rather than only a "second best" opportunity.

Community colleges, similar to other institutions of higher learning, seek to encourage academic excellence from a diversified student body. Characteristically the students are commuters with at least a part time job. Community colleges typically have more part time than full time students, many of whom are employed full time. Many students are attracted to community colleges because of their practical career and technical programs. Community colleges with their open enrollment policies provide a second chance for those with a modest high school record, who with the necessary guidance, motivation and application can blossom into academic achievers.

Honors programs in the community college setting offer a challenge to the motivated and talented achievers who wish to develop their intellectual capabilities to their fullest potential. These programs foster creativity and provide opportunities for interdisciplinary and independent study. In their goal statements, honors programs list the benefits for the students, the faculty and the community college. Besides the emphasis on intellectual stimulation for students and faculty, there is the practical aspects of image, recruitment and recognition (c.f. Appendix A for sample goal statements).

Honors programs vary considerably among community colleges. Many colleges experiment with honors by offering special honors sections of introductory or general education courses. These courses are relatively easy to initiate and require only a minimal commitment of resources from the institution. Working within the courses, professors sharply challenge students' critical thinking and writing skills and explore course content with greater depth and sophistication. While theoretically

most introductory multi-sectioned courses could have honors sections, typically they are offered in the liberal art (humanities and social science areas) and to a lesser extent in the sciences and mathematics. This type of honors program may become a permanent mode for institutions that do not wish to commit further resources and cannot agree on a more comprehensive or prescribed honors curriculum. While this approach is intellectually rewarding for students and faculty, it usually lacks the academic and social linkage as well as the interdisciplinary flavor that more developed or comprehensive programs offer.

Many community colleges (including County College of Morris in New Jersey) offer a prescribed honors curriculum (c.f. Appendix B). This approach emphasizes a somewhat structured curriculum including several honors courses - usually in the humanities and social sciences - that all students must take; it also provides for an honors seminar that focuses on a particular theme. This type of curriculum requires greater institutional commitment to recruitment, advisement and program coordination. It also encourages greater interaction among honor students and faculty.

A variation of the prescribed curriculum is a core-orientated program that emphasizes the need for interaction among honor students taking a required group of courses that share a common theme and an interdisciplinary approach. Such a program exists at the Community College of Philadelphia. The theme of its program is western intellectual history. This program has been funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and is intended primarily for liberal arts students. While this type of program is attractive for those desiring an interdisciplinary

approach to western ideas, it may exclude high ability students not predisposed to this emphasis on traditional western heritage.

Independent study is another option for an honors program. This method is an individualized approach to honors and allows students, under the guidance of a faculty mentor, to explore topics in a wide variety of disciplines. Some institutions might be attracted to this mode because it can satisfy the needs of part time students as well as those in career and technical programs with a minimal commitment of institutional resources.

Some large community colleges, usually urban based, have developed a comprehensive honors program that encompasses two, three or all of the options mentioned above. These types of institutions have made a major commitment to honors and recognize the necessity of providing for a wide variety of honors opportunities. One of these opportunities is through the honors contract. This approach allows superior students to enroll in regular sections and to earn honors credit as a result of additional or more complex assignments. The comprehensive honors program is ambitious, but its versatility and multifaceted approach demonstrates a strong commitment to the possibilities and creativity of honors.

Eligibility requirements for honors courses or programs vary considerably. A few colleges have no admission requirement believing that the program itself is a screening mechanism. This approach appears unrealistic and may be detrimental to the student as well as the program. Most require the student have a minimum grade point average for

high school or college courses (usually between 3.2 and 3.5); some require SAT or ACT minimum test scores. Typically the entering freshman would need about an 1100 SAT score or a 25 ACT score. Class rank in high school vary between the upper 25% to the upper 10%. High school or college recommendations, previous achievements, an interview and an essay may also be required.

Most colleges require a minimum G.P.A. for students to continue in the honors program - somewhere between a 3.0 and 3.5 in honors courses as well as in the overall cumulative G.P.A. Similar requirements plus a minimum number of honors credits are required for honors graduation recognition. It is generally agreed that access to honors should be available to both entering and continuing students. Colleges invite students who achieve a minimum G.P.A. (usually between 3.0 and 3.5 and sometimes with a faculty recommendation) to take honors courses. It is important that achieving "late bloomer" students have honors opportunities.

Besides the intellectual rewards of an honors program there are other services and recognitions provided by the colleges. These include special designation of honors courses on the college transcript, scholarship assistance for outstanding students, special recognition at graduation or at an honors convocation and transfer scholarship assistance to four year colleges/universities, especially for those continuing in honors programs. Cultural events, co-curricula trips and liaison activities with Phi Theta Kappa and the National Collegiate Honors Council are offered in conjunction with honors programs. The publication of an Honors Journal containing outstanding papers and projects of honors students is also a recognition afforded to deserving honors students. It also has

the added feature of providing visibility to the program.

An honors program can only be successful if it has an enthusiastic, intellectually aware and dedicated faculty. Teaching honors is demanding and challenging. Bright students need role models who are inspiring teachers and scholars. Faculty must display a love for learning and at the same time be willing to expend the extra energy and time in course development, advising students, grading papers, and reviewing and grading reports and essay exams. The participation of talented classroom teachers is essential. While extra compensation for honors teaching is rare, the intellectual satisfaction is most rewarding.

A program director is a key factor in the development of a successful honors program. This person, usually a faculty member, must be committed to honors and have the ability and time to deal with the myriad of administrative responsibilities that the program will demand (c.f. Appendix C for a sample job description). Administrative support in the form of adequate release time for the director is essential. In a comprehensive honors program with significant student enrollments, the granting of full release time may be necessary. In typical honors programs most of the directors have about half released time (six to nine hours a semester). Administrative backing must be more than just verbal or token support or else the colleges run the risk of losing the program.

Virtually all programs have an honors program committee that advises the director on policies and procedures and provides imput from various segments of the college community. The committee is composed mainly of faculty from a variety of disciplines and may also include a college administrator

(dean, counselor or admissions office person) and an honors student (for instance, the president of the local Phi Theta Kappa Chapter).

Honors programs, like other academic programs, need evaluation. Depending on the institution and its general evaluative procedures, the method of evaluation may be structured or informal. The director, the committee, the college administration and the students have a concern for the integrity and quality of the program and all should be part of the evaluative process.

Having described the goals, characterictics, models, and component parts of honors programs, it it also necessary to discuss concerns and problems that are common to honors programs. In this discussion, I will relate the experiences of persons involved with honors programs including my own.

A theorical or philosophical issue on some campuses is the elitist nature of honors programs. Proponents of egalitarianism in community colleges have argued that an honors program would siphon off funding from financially needy and developmental (remedial) students. Usually these arguments are not persuasive in view of the comprehensive mission of community colleges to serve all of its students including both those who will benefit from developmental programs and those who will benefit from honors programs. There is a consensus that honors is a tangible way to promote academic excellence in an academic community environment and that the program is therefore a distinct asset to a community college.

The cost of initiating and maintaining an honors program is relatively low. Expenses include released time for the director, funding for some

scholarship aid, conferences for honors faculty, co-curricular trips, cultural events, secretarial assistance and mailings. Other indirect costs include the limiting of class size in honors sections.

A realistic concern of faculty is that honors courses will isolate most of the brighter students. In reality this does not happen. For a variety of reasons the vast majority of the better students will not enroll in honors courses. Reasons include scheduling, concern over jeopardizing G.P.A., extra assignments in honors, work schedule, etc. Nearly ten percent of the eleven thousand students at Bergen Community College qualify for honors. However, enrollment in our honors sections has never exceeded one hundred students. Over ninety percent of our better students remain in regular sections. The problem is actually how to attract a greater number of the talented students into honors sections.

The selection of faculty to teach honors sections can be problematic. The selection is usually made by the divisional/department head after consulting with the program director. In most colleges this is not a major issue. Some faculty will not want to expend the extra time and energy that honors teaching demands without compensation. Teaching honors should be voluntary and its appeal is the intellectual stimulation that it brings. It is a form of faculty development that encourages a creative and satisfying teacher/learner relationship.

Some faculty who have participated in honors teaching have had bad experiences. Occasionally students who should not have been admitted into honors have managed to enroll. This can be and controlled if a computer check of students is made before classes start. In addition, if honors classes are cancelled for low enrollment, faculty schedules are changed at the last minute. Instances of this have caused some faculty to avoid teaching honors. Administrative allowance of honors sections to be offered with low enrollment (under ten students) can alleviate this problem.

In experimenting with honors, some colleges have permitted honors and non-honors students to enroll in the same section. In the humanities area, this approach has usually not been very successful. Faculty are faced with a dilemma of conceptual approach and level of sophistication. In the sciences and mathematics areas, the mixture of honors and non honors (in order to have sufficient enrollment) has had better results. Honor students receive more challenging assignments, labs and tests.

The determination of a prescribed honors curriculum can be a difficult theorical and practical issue. Some will want honors for all students, others for only those in transfer programs. Several years ago at Bergen Community College we initiated honors sections for general education courses. Our honors program committee, after many meetings, proposed an honors curriculum for A.A. and A.S. transfer students that required students to take honors courses across the curriculum. (c.f. Appendix D).

This proposal was a compromise proposal that still needs the approval of the college curriculum committee, the faculty senate and the college administration.

A caveat concerning honors. The main purpose of the program should not be significantly increasing enrollment or dramatically changing the image of the college. Honors should be viewed as an academic opportunity and challenge, not as a public relations gimmick.

Virtually all community colleges can initiate some type of honors program. The cost factor, especially for small programs, is minimal. The intellectual rewards for the participants and the college community are immeasurable. A successful honors program will strengthen and enrich the quality of a community college's educational mission and enhance its quest for excellence.

APPENDIX A

Goals of Honors Program at Maricopa Community College
Phoenix, Arizona

To attract and retain superior students.

To recognize and meet the special needs of superior students.

To improve the overall image of the college

To challenge and provide satisfaction to the faculty.

To service as a focal point for development of innovative programs, services and courses.

To provide special recognition and rewards for truly outstanding students

Some community colleges specify detailed curricula/course objectives such as:

Goals of Honors Program of Frederick Community College, Maryland

To acquaint students with the literary, artictic, scientific, historical, and societal forces which have shaped our cultural heritage.

To promote an understanding of the major forces at work in the contemporary world, to encourage more effective participation in society

To aid in the development of critical minds

To refine student ability to communicate effectively

To develop a responsiveness to the creative works of others

To encourage the capacity to be an independent learner and an effective problem solver.

To instill a respect for learning, inquiry, and scholarship and understand their application to the everyday world.

APPENDIX B

COUNTY COLLEGE OF MORRIS, NEW JERSEY

HONORS PROGRAM CURRICULUM SEQUENCE

OPTION I
Humanities/Social Science

First Year	Credits
Honors English	6
Honors Seminars	6
Honors Sociology	6
Foreign Language	6
Mathematics	6/8
Physical Education	2
	32/34

Second Year	Credits
Honors History	6
Honors Seminars	6
Lab Science	8
Electives	9
Independent Study	3
	32

OPTION II
Mathematics/Science

First Year	Credits
Honors English	6
Honors Seminars	6
Foreign Language	. 6
Mathematics	6/8
Lab Science	8
Physical Education	2
	34/36

Second Year	Credits
Honors Seminars	6
Lab Science	8
Electives	9/10
Honors History	6
Independent Study	3
	32/33

APPENDIX C
DIRECTOR OF HONORS PROGRAM

The Director of the Honors Program will be directly responsible to the Dean of Instructional Services for the effective supervision and management of the Honors Program and for providing advisement services to students enrolled in the Program.

Responsibilities and Duties:

A. Program and Curriculum Development
   1. A rationale and goals statement will be issued.
   2. A brochure describing the Honors Program will be developed and published.
   3. Continued development of the honors program considering various honors models for implementation in the future.
   4. Course development and review.

B. Recruitment and Selection of Students
   1. Contacting high schools and making presentations concerning the Honors Program.
   2. Developing criteria for the selection of honors students (e.g., G.P.A., S.A.T., class rank, recommendations).
   3. Administrative liaison with Assistant Dean of Students Services, Admissions and Registrar's Office, Coordinator of skills tests, Computer Center, Coordinator of the One Step Ahead Program, and other administrative and staff personnel.
   4. Meeting and interviewing of students. This will consist both of new students as well as continuing students.
   5. Articulation with Phi Theta Kappa Chapter.

C. Scheduling of Honors Courses
   1. Consult with Dean of Instructional Services, Divisional Deans, Honors Program Committee and faculty concerning the selection and scheduling of honors courses.
   2. Notify students of honors courses and advise students on course selection.
   3. Overall supervision, coordination and review of course selections.

D. Liaison with Faculty
   1. Identifying and meeting with faculty teaching honors courses.
   2. Discuss courses and teaching strategies with faculty.
   3. Coordinating faculty review and evaluation of courses.

E. Administrative Networking
   1. Coordinating with college administrators especially the Dean of Instructional Services and Divisional Deans concerning various phases of the honors program.
   2. Developing and coordinating scholarships, projects and cultural activities.
   3. Publicity for honors program.
   4. Developing a budget.

F. Honors Program Committee
   1. Chair the regular meetings of this committee that recommends policies and procedures.
   2. Dissemination of minutes and other information.
   3. Maintaining an on-campus support system.

G. Developing Community and Off-Campus Support
   1. Liaison with high schools.
   2. Seeking scholarship support of business and industry.
   3. Attending conferences, seminars and workshops.
   4. Articulation with national and regional honors organizations as well as Directors of Honors Program at other colleges.

APPENDIX D

Proposal for Honors Program Curriculum

1. Program Description

The Honors Program is particularly designed for students in the A.A. and A.S. degree programs. Students will be required to complete a minimum of 18 credits of honor credits. At least 12 of these credits must be from honors courses in their degree program and at least six credits outside of their degree area.

Honors Program Proposal

A.A. Degree		A.S. Degree	
12 credits from Humanities and Social Sciences	6 credits from Mathematics and Natural Science	12 credits from Mathematics and Natural Sciences	6 credits from Humanities and Social Sciences

Graduating students who complete the 18 honors credits with a 3.0 G.P.A. as well as at least an overall 3.0 G.P.A. will have successfully completed the honors program. It is proposed that these students receive a special designation on their college transcripts and diplomas indicating that they completed an honors program. It is also proposed that they receive recognition at graduation.

2. Prerequisites for Courses Included in Curriculum

Honors sections of selected General Education courses are offered each semester. Students are invited to register for honors courses based on the following criteria: entering freshmen must graduate in the upper quarter of their high school class. Continuing students must have completed 12 degree credits with a 3.4 G.P.A. or a 3.0 G.P.A. if they receive a faculty recommendation. Students receive an honors designation on their college transcript after completing honors courses.

3. Justification and Rationale

Providing special services for students has long been the mission of the community college. The educational needs of developmental, international, handicapped and mature students have been addressed by most community colleges. In the past decade, an increasing number of community colleges have expanded their comprehensive mission to include the special needs of high ability students.

Bergen Community College has responded to its commitment to excellence by establishing a chapter of Phi Theta Kappa (National Honor Society) and by offering honor sections for high academic achievers. These honor sections have provided an enriching experience for both students and faculty.

An Honors Program Committee, composed of faculty and a student member (President of Phi Theta Kappa) has developed a flexible honors program to serve the needs of honors students. The assets of an honor program will benefit the college, its students and faculty.

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